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PROBLEMS IN COUNSELING NAVAJO REHABILITATION CLIENTS. NAVAJO REHABILITATION PROJECT.

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SOME CONDITIONS OF THE COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP WITH NAVAJOS ARE DESCRIBED. UNKEPT APPOINTMENTS ARE FREQUENT. THE COUNSELOR IS PERCEIVED AS A SOLVER OF IMMEDIATE PRACTICAL PROBLEMS RATHER THAN AS AN AGENT OF INTERPERSONAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGE. TO THE NAVAJO, HE IS OFTEN AN AUTHORITY FIGURE. LANGUAGE IS AN ALMOST INSURMOUNTABLE BARRIER EXCEPT WITH THE MOST INCULTURATED NAVAJOS. IT TAKES LONGER TO ESTABLISH RAPPORT. NAVAJOS WITHDRAW PSYCHOLOGICALLY WHEN ANXIOUS. THE SUPERFICIALITY OF THE PSYCHODYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP IS DUE TO TARDY POSITIVE TRANSFERENCE AND OTHER CULTURAL FACTORS. EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC OBSTACLES MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR MOST NAVAJOS TO ACHIEVE MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICAN LEVELS OF SUCCESS. HOWEVER, IF CULTURAL-PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES ARE ANTICIPATED AND ACCEPTED, AND IF STEREOTYPING IS AVOIDED, CONSTRUCTIVE, WARM, AND SATISFYING COUNSELING RELATIONSHIPS MAY DEVELOP. (WR)

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Navajo Rehabilitation Project Technical Report No. 4

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Introduction

Navajos are under-employed and their average income is much below the national average (Young, 1958, P. 199, pp. 356-360, 375-378; Young, 1961, pp. 207-209, 220-233). Poverty and other social inequities produce in Navajos cultural and personality characteristics which are similar to other disadvantaged groups (Anonymous, 1964, pp. 1-7; Hill, 1965, pp. 3-4; Jones, 1966, pp. 1-17; Lewis, 1961, P. XII; Weller, 1965, pp. 34-160). However, Navajos have unique cultural, social, linguistic, and thinking patterns (Graves, 1965, pp. 5-7; Kluckhohn, 1962, pp. 229-321; Kluckhohn, 1961, pp. 10-48, 319-339; Michener, 1965, P. 22; Underhill, 1963, pp. 230-241; Young, 1958, P. 199, pp. 356-360, 375-378). Obviously, some of the comments made here about the counselor's relationship with Navajos apply to relationships established with other Athabaskan-speaking and other Southwest Indians; they apply especially to relationships with close relatives of the Navajos, the Apaches. Furthermore, stereotyping and over-generalizing about any ethnic group creates distorted perceptual images. Some who are genetically "pure" Navajos are typical middle-class Americans in language, education, and culture. On the other hand, Navajo is the first language for most Navajos (Young, 1958, P. 119, pp. 356-360, 375-378). Some do not understand or speak English; some have no formal education; and few have completed college. The counselor experienced in cross-cultural contact will recognize extreme differences in the degree of inculturation of his Navajo clients. In counseling Navajos, then, the more inculturated the client, the more likely the counseling relationship is similar to the counseling relationship established with other people.

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With these comments as a background, some of the conditions of the counseling relationship with Navajos which have impressed the authors will be described and illustrated with excerpts from counseling interviews. An attempt has been made to present the excerpts as exactly as written language can reproduce spoken language.

1. Unkept Appointments

In attempting to establish a psychological counseling relationship, there is a high probability that the Navajo client will break the second appointment. The probability of broken appointments is frequent after the first counseling interview in any psychotherapeutic setting; but the experience of the authors indicates that it is much higher with Navajo clients than with others. It is probable that the Navajo rehabilitation client will return to see the counselor; but when he does, it will usually be for help with an immediate problem, a request for some kind of concrete help. Often the request will be unrelated to the original reason for contact; and it almost certainly will be a request for something other than help in gaining psychological insight.

It is "difficult" to tape an unkept appointment, but the following excerpt gives some indication of a client's feelings and committment toward keeping an appointment with another agency.

Client - (T.R.): They said they would uh teach me how to do this radio outfit.

Counselor: Now have you had any reply from the Tribe?

Client: Uh, no, I was suppose to go back there myself but I didn't think I could.

* * * *

2. Counselor, a Solver of Immediate Needs

The Navajo client will usually view the counselor as an agent for solving immediate practical problems, medical, social or economic, rather than as an agent of interpersonal or psychological change. Most Navajo clients served by the authors viewed the counselor as a person who would arrange for some direct service to him or his family; arrange for

emergency support from a Navajo Tribal organization; arrange for welfare benefits or medical care from some government agency; provide transportation; get a casket for a deceased child; make a personal loan to him; or find him a job and place him directly on it.

In the following examples the client was willing to place the responsibility for actions at the counselor's doorstep:

Client - (T.R.): We're having problems uh----in ways of financial, so huh----

* * * * *

Client - T.R.): I talked to Earl Woodson about uh--- he said that maybe they could uh---- if the program could really find me a job----

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Client - (J.M.): If--------you get that job for me I'll take it.

Counselor: Would you rather have a job full time or would you rather have a job that is part time with the part time lessons that you get here?

Client: Full time.

Counselor: You're oriented; what you want right now is a job, right?

Client: Yeah

* * * * *

Client - (J.N.): My real problem is---ah---I need $2.75 for a bus ticket to Winslow--- I wonder if I could borrow it from you?

* * * * *

Counselor: What is it about going back that you don't--- that makes you feel that you would rather go someplace else?

Client - (L.S.): Well, it's just that, it's just that, I guess that the job is more important than just being here an sitting around your mother. I would rather work than just sit around because we don't have much to do back home now in the summer time especially now when my sisters and brothers come home----well, we're a lot of family-------

* * * * *

3. Counselor, an Authority Figure

The Navajo client seldom understands the role of the counselor as an agent of personality and psychological change, or as a catalyst in fostering insight. For the Navajo client, the expectation of the counselor role is that of an authority similar to other "white-man" authorities in his past. The counselor may be seen as the authority who offers reward or metes out punishments, grants or withholds welfare requests. This "white-man", if he can be properly manipulated, may be seen as supportive; or he may be seen as the authoritarian teacher, principal or dormitory attendent, the authoritarian policeman or welfare worker. He may identify the counselor as the "white-man" conqueror and natural enemy of the Navajo people; or as the dispenser of government "debts" to Indians.

The following excerpts point to the factors the counselor must deal with: "What personal committment and responsibility do you, the client, take for your actions and present life situation," and "Why do you expect me to make your decisions for you?"

Client - (J.M.): How do I feel about what I'm going to do?

Counselor: How do you feel about what you're here for? Why are you here?

Client: To learn and to find a---------job, too.

Counselor: To learn what?

Client: Some lesson? or training.

Counselor: And, as long as there is a job here that you can earn some money at, you'll stay, is that it?

Client: Yeah

* * * * *

Counselor: There are no central problems at work that might bring on these attacks?

Client - (J.S.): It was ma left ear that does, I can't believe----I don't say anything to no body, you know.

Counselor: You lose hearing in that ear?

Client: Yeah, I just can't find it at all.

Counselor: Have you told the doctor about this?

Client: No

Counselor: You know, sometimes I think you play games with the doctor.

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4. Language Barrier

Language, for the non-Navajo counselor of Navajos, is an insurmountable barrier except with the most inculturated Navajos. Few Navajos learn to speak English as well as non-Navajos of equal intelligence and formal education. The Navajo language itself carries many verbal and cultural connotations which are impossible to translate into English. Naturally, if an interpreter is used, the content of both the counselor's statements and the client's statements are winnowed through the interpreter's cognative and conative sieve. With an interpreter standing between the counselor and the client, it is highly improbable that true counseling rapport is ever attained.

Bilingual clients present a basic problem of communication. Other aspects of the counseling relationship must

wait until the counselor clearly understands what the client says and the client understands what the counselor says.

Counselor: What would you like to have happen to you?

Client - (J.H.): Uh huh-------

Counselor: I can't hear you, Jim.

Client: Well it's jus huh, jus uh, I'm thinking now that uh circumstances jus help me finish up my school.

Counselor: You're thinking now that you want more school?

Client: Uh huh

* * * * *'

Client -(J.H.): I know it is, hard for not to be trouble for other kind of work, isn't it?

Counselor: Um huh

Client: What other kind of work I gonna get?

* * * * *

Client - (J.H.): If I got job----

Counselor: I didn't understand you.

Client: I don't know about the job, what I gonna do? I don't know if I go ahead.

* * * * *

5. Time Taken to Establish Rapport

Navajos generally withdraw psychologically when they are anxious rather than covering up the anxiety by talking. They are generally more withdrawn in the early contacts. The Navajo counselee may be seen at this time as the stereotyped passive Indian. It takes longer to establish rapport with Navajos than with the usual counselee. From the initial to later counseling sessions, when rapport is finally achieved,

there is more apparent personality change in terms of friendliness and joking than with most non-Indian counselees.

The apparent dissociation presented in the first of the following excerpts was more the result of the newness of locale and the demands of the present situation than a psychotic constellation. The important "she" of the Client J. Y. conversation is an example of the "Navajo" mother.

Client - (P.L.): The first time I came here I was kind of scared and shakey and then some--about a few months ago--- lonely, but now I'm not----but anyway uh God is with me.

Counselor: He is with you, well, uh, that is security for you, isn't it?

Client: He tells me not to be lonely here, tells me to be happy.

Counselor: Do you talk with God very often?

Client: Only in this state.

Counselor: Pardon?

Client: Only here in Flagstaff.

* * * * *

Counselor: You say your mother asked you whether you are going to get married and you said no; did you say no because this is what she wanted to hear, or is this how you really feel?

Client - (J.Y.): I guess that's how I feel, I guess that's how I really feel and that's what she want to hear---so I guess that's why she ask and my dad says the same thing, too.

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6. Psychodynamic Superficiality of the Relationship

Because of the already mentioned attitudes and because of other cultural personality factors, it is unrealistic to expect quick positive transference. Navajos are reared in a conceptual framework which appears alien to dynamic descriptions of behavior. Few Navajo clients reveal their innermost thoughts or describe their behavior in psychodynamic terms. Tardy or complete lack of development of positive transference in the counseling relationship probably is not just the result of the distorted role expectations Navajos assign to the counselor; but, transference difficulties also result from culture-fostered personality characteristics. Navajos seldom develop intense positive or negative transference. Therefore, the verbalized psychodynamic content is often superficial.

The following excerpts are taken after a number of contacts. They demonstrate a relaxation not present in earlier interviews, and a willingness to talk at least "around" problems. The recognition in these excerpts of the responsibilities for living and working in an urban setting, and the ability to express disapproval of "mother domination" in a matri-focal, sometimes matriarchal, society, are noteable advances in the counseling relationship.

Client -(J.S.): I'm sure that I won't be able to hold a steady job very long.

Counselor: Why do you feel that you won't be able to hold a steady job?

Client: Cause I get sick once in a while and I know I'll have a bigger boss than, be bigger than Miss N.

* * * * *

Client - (T.R.): He didn't like the way I was running things; I didn't like the way he was acting. I wanted to do everyting I do is right, I wanted to make sure it was right, so that any moment anyone could tell.

Counselor: Then this friction, your mother was kind of in the middle?

Client: Yeah, when I work and I bring money home and give to her well the, from then on she give to him----that what hurts me most.

* * * * *

7. Social Obstacles to Positive Counseling Outcome

When interviewing Navajos, the counselor is haunted by the economic disadvantages uneducated Indians face in American society. Educational, social and economic obstacles make it difficult or impossible for most Navajos to obtain middle-class American levels of success. These obstacles are frustrating both to Navajos and their vocational counselors.

When cross-cultural factors are prevalent, attitude changes often are made with difficulty. The following excerpts illustrate problems of alcoholism, the force of "mom" in the family and other cultural patterns and problems in the Navajo home.

Client - (T.R.): ------and I had a stepfather after a while-----that's what caused all of the trouble. I run him off.

Counselor: You ran him off?

Client: Yeah, he started hitting the bottle pretty bad.

Counselor: Did your stepfather work at all?

Client: He wasn't one to work, he couldn't even hold jobs over one day.

* * * * *

Client - (J.Y.): I guess it's jus because uh you know, I hate to leave my parents and all that, I guess. Some day I'll have to.

Counselor: But you're kind of afraid to enter into a close relationship. Is this ------

Client: Yeah, I guess.

Counselor: Are you afraid of getting married because of what you see between you father and mother?

Client: I guess that's the reason why----right now, yeah, uh, I saw J. drunk once and from then on I was scared of him.

* * * * *

Counselor: Seems to me like your mom is a pretty powerful figure in your family, isn't she?

Client - (J.Y.): Yeah, she's about the only one who thinks for the family.

Counselor: Is this good or bad?

Client: Well, it's bad for my dad, cause he don't-- --he don't think for us and my mom, you know, I sort of feel sorry for her because she's-- --she's always got something on her mind. You know when I talk to her she won't listen to me, she'll jus be doing something else like thinkin you know. She'll be watchin TV, but she won't know what she's watchin.

Counselor: She's preoccupied?

* * * * *

Client - (L.S.): There's a lot of family, my parents, they really can't afford that much. So, I'd rather work to be supporting close to home with my family. Eleven sisters and three brothers.

Counselor: Eleven sisters and three brothers when you are all there then? Your father is not home?

Client: Yes, he's back now.

Counselor: He's back now.

Client: I don't think he's going back.

Counselor: And you feel that if you go back you're just one more in the whole process, in the whole "mess," I think is the word you used.

Client: Yeah, it's real crowded you know. You know, how houses of Navajos are. You can't all be at one time. At night time, you know, sometimes, well if there's a houses of Navajos are full, they're all there, you know, and nobody wants to leave their mother. It's one thing. Everybody wants to sleep in one room or be just crowded or something, you know.

* * * * *

Client - (L.S.): I was talking to her that's why, you know, she told me not to be too far off and all that. "You want to work someplace where you can be close to us because you're still under age, you know, and we won't let you go, you know, till you're over 21 or 22," she said, -----"you can't be somewhere else by yourself and still be teaching." She told me that one time and so that's why I wanta be---I want to work close to her.

Conclusion

These comments may sound as if counseling Navajos is ineffective and unrewarding, but it is the difficulties found in the counseling relationship which are stressed. If the cultural-personality differences are anticipated and accepted, and if stereotyping is avoided, constructive, warm and satisfying counseling relationships develop. Navajo cultural-personality differences create interest; their motivational similarities produce easy identification.

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